

CHAPTER III

The New Deal and Flood Control

1933-1934

A national program of flood control finally emerged during the course of the New Deal. It was part of the profusion of important Depression Era legislation enacted by the 74th Congress in 1935-1936, including the Social Security Act, the National Labor Relations Act, the Banking Act of 1935, the Wealth Tax Act, the Public Utilities Holding Company Act, the Rural Electrification Act, the Soil Conservation Service Act, and the \$4.8 billion Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935. Out of this last act, designed to create public work relief programs, came the Works Progress Administration (WPA) programs, the National Youth Administration, the Resettlement Administration and, ultimately, the Flood Control Act of 1936.

The flood control act reflected the general tendency of New Deal legislation to amalgamate the concerns of a variety of groups and public constituencies. The final version of the act embodied ideas from at least six different political entities within the federal government which, in turn, represented the larger interests outside the government. These internal forces were the House Committee on Flood Control, the Senate Commerce Committee, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Department of Agriculture, the White House (the President and his chief advisors), and, through the White House, the National Resources Committee. Each of these groups approached the issue differently, and within each group there was disagreement, often minor but sometimes substantial. During 1935, when legislation on the subject first appeared, discord was the rule rather than the exception. No aspect of the question evoked general consensus.

By the spring of 1936, flood control proponents had achieved considerable progress. Primarily as a consequence of the unprecedented floods of that spring, nearly unanimous agreement had been reached in Congress that major floods were indeed a great national menace, that the solution rested with



President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

some form of nationwide flood control administered by an agency of the federal government, and that it should be financed in some measure by federal funds. This left five specific areas of disagreement: the degree to which the flood control effort should be linked to a larger multipurpose river basin development program; the agency that should administer the program; the proper division of costs between the federal government and the state and local interests; the advisability of combining watershed soil conservation pro-

grams with the more traditional structural approaches to flood control, such as levees or, increasingly common, reservoirs; and the specific potential flood control projects that should be recommended for construction.

The attitudes and opinions of President Roosevelt are central to any understanding of the New Deal, and this applies specifically to the evolution of the Flood Control Act of 1936. Even though congressional flood control advocates, rather than the White House, initiated this act, Roosevelt's position on this legislation, although not particularly well understood, generally influenced the tactics of both promoters and detractors of the bill, and FDR's direct influence was important during the final stages of drafting and lobbying in 1936. Those who have written about flood control during the New Deal era have linked the act directly to Roosevelt's conservation program. While this is not entirely correct, no doubt the President, as well as most conservationists, thought of flood control as part of natural resources conservation. Roosevelt was not, as some have thought, a strong advocate of a "planned society," but natural resources conservation, including the multipurpose development of river basins, was one area where he did advocate centralized federal planning.¹ Roosevelt was devoted to the idea of a federal natural resources

planning agency to coordinate all aspects of conservation and resource development. This idea, embodied in the National Resources Committee, nearly derailed the flood control bill in the spring of 1936 because the bill made almost no attempt to coordinate flood control with other aspects of water and land conservation, including multipurpose development.

Roosevelt's attitudes and opinions about flood control, river development, and conservation are difficult to explain. They reflect both pragmatic and romantic qualities. Foremost in FDR's mind was the land itself-the nation's greatest single resource. Soil conservation, reforestation, irrigation, scientific agriculture, and parks were all subjects close to the President's heart and almost continually on his mind. Rural America-its farms, forests, and small towns and its vast, rolling landscapes -had a grip on his imagination that almost no other subject held.² His private letters, public speeches, and press conferences all testify to this enduring love affair.

Still, there were purely political calculations to be considered in regard to the 1936 flood control bill. The bill came up for his consideration just as the 1936 presidential campaign opened. This was the first major test of the New Deal, and FDR still felt little assurance that a great electoral victory was at hand. He was clearly unhappy with the flood control bill and was urged by his National Resources Committee to kill it. On the other hand, many important areas of the nation had just suffered severely from disastrous floods in 1935-1936 and there was some intense political pressure on the White House to take action. Thus, the President's views in this matter were motivated by his personal attitudes and preferences toward natural resources development, his response to a national disaster, and the realities of politics in an election year.

Oddly, the "Squire of Hyde Park" did not appear to have quite the same deep feeling about rivers and water resources that he had for the fields and forests. He enjoyed gazing at the Hudson from his estate and was fairly well informed on the subject of waterways development and flood control, but these areas never sparked his interest as did the subject of agriculture or, to be sure, forests.³ He strongly believed that reforestation could significantly reduce flooding.⁴ Roosevelt's attitude partially explains his curiously passive role in the legislative history of the Flood Control Act of 1936. It may also explain why developing a

national flood control policy appears to have ranked below a large number of other natural resource efforts, such as reforestation, on the White House priority list.⁵ In 1935 and 1936 Roosevelt was asked about flood control at several press conferences, and his responses indicate that while he had a general idea of how his own National Resources Committee was proceeding in this area, he had not considered the question in detail. He appeared to have even less knowledge of how Congress was proceeding with its own bill until May 1936, when it was almost on his desk.⁶

However, the low priority given flood control in the White House did not mean that the President was necessarily indifferent or opposed to a national flood control program. From his earliest days in politics, Roosevelt had supported flood control as part of a larger program of multipurpose river development. In a 1914 letter, he told a Louisiana engineer that the Mississippi flood problem could probably be solved by more levees, a large number of reservoirs (which could be paid for by selling electric power from them), and, of course, by an ambitious reforestation program.⁷ Following the Mississippi flood of 1927, Roosevelt was among those who immediately pushed for a special session of Congress to draft flood control legislation, and he questioned senators in the affected states as to what needed to be done.⁸ While campaigning for the presidency in 1932, Roosevelt stated that he would support a major expansion of Hoover's reservoir construction program, and he made a specific commitment to build a basin-wide system of dams for the Tennessee Valley for power and flood control.⁹

Upon taking office, Roosevelt appeared to move rapidly in the area of flood prevention. As promised, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was created. The President's unemployment relief program of 1933, which led to the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps and the other work relief programs, included projects aimed at flood control. Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 also authorized public funding of flood control projects.¹⁰

Unfortunately, the TVA work, the Title II Public Works Administration (PWA) dams, and the continuing series of Bureau of Reclamation projects in the West (which had some flood control value) did not add up to anything like a significant flood control program nor were the projects well coordinated with other river basin activities. Much of the flood control money

actually went to reforestation and erosion control activities, which were only indirectly useful for flood control, or for work on the Mississippi and on just a few other rivers.¹¹ Under Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, large construction programs on the nation's waterways, highways, rural areas, and cities were to be coordinated by the Interior Department's Public Works Administration. When the problems of project coordination became more apparent, the responsibility was given to a national planning board, which Interior Secretary Harold L. Ickes created on 30 July 1933 with Frederic A. Delano, the distinguished planner (and the



*Frederic A. Delano, Chairman,
National Resources Planning Board,
1933-1943.*

President's uncle), as chairman. Within this agency, water resources projects were the responsibility of a group called the Mississippi Valley Committee under the direction of Morris L. Cooke, an engineer from Philadelphia. Rather than simply coordinating PWA river project planning, this committee also undertook a very broad study of the entire Mississippi basin. The National Planning Board eventually became the National Resources Committee (NRC), and that committee proposed a detailed, nationwide multipurpose river basin program, including a large flood control component that was embraced by the President. Unfortunately for the NRC, however, its proposal did not appear until six months after passage of the Flood Control Act of 1936.¹²

Congress showed little interest in a coordinated multipurpose water resources program. The rivers and harbors bloc remained suspicious of any tampering with its historic ties to the Corps of Engineers. Flood control advocates, enthusiastic about projects promising both flood protection and unemployment relief, showed little concern over how those projects related to other aspects of waterway development. Until the great floods of 1935 and 1936 galvanized almost the entire Congress behind



Riley J. Wilson, Representative from Louisiana, 1915-1937.

flood control, the chief flood control proponents were from the lower Mississippi and Ohio river valleys, although there were many supporters, mainly Democrats, from other flood-threatened sections of the nation. These congressmen had hoped to see a large program of reservoir and levee construction initiated in the early days of the New Deal and were frustrated by the slow pace of the emergency relief program in this field.¹³ The center of congressional interest was the House Committee on Flood Control and its new chairman, Representative Riley J. Wilson.

Wilson has received almost no credit for his role as the original author of the Flood Control Act of 1936. He was born in Winn Parish, Louisiana, which is located in the northern part of the state between the Mississippi and Red river valleys, an area that today is liberally dotted with flood control reservoirs, none of which bear his name. After both of his parents died, he struggled to get an education and to build a career. With a law degree, he was elected to the state House of Representatives and later appointed a judge in Louisiana's 8th Judicial District. In 1914, at the age of 43, he was elected to the U.S. Congress. He entered the 64th Congress in 1915 and began his rise to power on the Flood Control Committee soon after its establishment in 1916. Flood control became the great issue upon which he staked his political career and to which he devoted almost all his efforts. He was a dedicated lobbyist for federal flood control for Louisiana; however, he gradually became determined to extend the generous federal expenditures, such as those Louisiana received, to all areas of the nation that suffered from flood disasters.

By 1933 Wilson was a congressional expert on flood control and one of the few members of Congress to have participated in nearly all the flood control hearings and debates since the

establishment of the Flood Control Committee in 1916 and the passage of the nation's first flood control act in 1917. In 1933 he advanced to the chairmanship of the Flood Control Committee, which should have made him a major power in his home state. However, his opposition to Huey Long, to whom he had lost the governor's race in 1928, made him vulnerable politically. His sponsorship of the Flood Control Act of 1936 was the crowning achievement of his congressional career. Ironically, it was his last achievement, for Wilson was defeated by the Long machine in the 1936 Louisiana Democratic primary and was forced to retire from politics.¹⁴

Wilson lost no time in doing his duty as chairman of the Committee on Flood Control after Roosevelt took office. In the midst of the "hundred days" when the New Deal public works program was moving rapidly through Congress, Wilson urged the new President to make flood control an important part of the administration's unemployment relief program. Louis Howe, FDR's assistant, cautiously replied, "There is no doubt that flood control will be included, but it is impossible to say at this time just what projects will be considered." Howe urged Wilson to "keep in touch with the program as it develops, so we may have the benefit of your suggestions."¹⁵ Wilson was not alone in seeking public works funds for flood control. Increasing numbers of congressmen requested projects. Others espoused projects of even larger scope. Bills were being prepared to create authorities similar to the TVA to build whole systems of multipurpose reservoirs in other river basins. By the end of 1933, bills had been introduced for TVA-style projects on eight river basins.¹⁶

The author of one of these bills (for the Missouri basin) was Senator George W. Norris. The senator was a key figure in prodding the Roosevelt administration to support flood control and comprehensive river basin development. He was also the chief congressional link between the New Deal's water resources program and Francis Newlands' river development proposals of the Wilson era. Norris first grasped the possibilities of multipurpose river development during the debates over the Mississippi flood problem and the more general discussion of the old Inland Waterways Commission. Back in 1916 Norris had suggested that the Mississippi's floodwaters be contained by building dams on the tributaries, with costs shared by the farmers on the tributaries, who gained irrigation water, and those



Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, 1933-1946.

on the lower Mississippi, who received flood protection. The theme of multipurpose development was refined by Norris during his long fight in the 1920s to develop the Tennessee Valley.¹⁷ In 1932 Norris left the Republican party to campaign for Roosevelt. The two became good friends and political allies throughout the New Deal, and Norris often served as an administration spokesman in Congress. In January 1933, a short time before his inauguration, Roosevelt announced his support for Norris's Tennessee Valley program. The TVA bill was

signed into law on 18 May 1933.¹⁸

With the establishment of the TVA assured, Norris turned his attention to the larger question of the Mississippi and Missouri valleys. By the time the second session of the 73d Congress opened in January 1934, he had developed an outline of a huge multipurpose river basin plan for the Missouri River Valley, which he introduced into Congress on 4 January.¹⁹ The day before, he sent a long letter to President Roosevelt, with a copy to Secretary Ickes, suggesting that some funds be allocated for "making a survey and study of the possibility of improvement of some of our interior streams" such as the Missouri, Arkansas, and other major rivers in the Mississippi Valley. The survey would examine particularly "the relationship between irrigation, flood control, navigation, power development, reclamation of marginal lands, [and] the reforestation of these lands." He said that much money had been wasted on piecemeal projects that failed to account for the interrelationship of these elements. He also thought the study should determine the manner in which federal and local costs should be divided and the proper apportionment of local costs, according to which population groups received the various benefits of reservoir projects.²⁰ He offered

this idea as a means to use more efficiently the emergency relief funds that had already been authorized and to avoid duplication of surveys, although he admitted he did not know how much survey work had been done. He made no mention of the Corps' 308 reports.

Ickes and Roosevelt were aware of the problems alluded to by Norris. FDR replied (in a letter probably drafted by Ickes) that a Mississippi Valley Committee (MVC) had recently been created "for the purpose of studying and correlating projects involving flood control, navigation, irrigation, power, reforestation and soil erosion in the Mississippi drainage area." Through the work of the MVC, he concluded, "much will be done to correlate the various independent studies that have hertofore been made."²¹ Roosevelt's letter to Norris did not address the question of the increasing number of river basin authority bills being drafted in Congress. On 26 December FDR asked Senator Clarence C. Dill (D-Washington) to talk with Norris and others interested in this river legislation. Dill replied that "we are likely to find ourselves overloaded with bills for the creation of these [river basin] authorities and Congress is likely to drop all of them" unless they could somehow be consolidated into a single piece of legislation.²²

In spite of the MVC's preliminary work, 1933 ended without any administration policy on flood control, any river basin development, or any clear direction in Congress. Roosevelt limited his mention of flood control in his annual message to Congress on 3 January 1934 to simply hinting that the creation of more projects like TVA was at least being considered.²³ At a press conference held later that day, the President talked about his river basin ideas, but gave few specifics. He said he hoped to get a "complete national picture" of the problems in the river basins of the country and to develop comprehensive plans to solve them. He thought that plans for nearly every major river basin could be fairly well developed by mid-1936. Then the federal government could begin "rebuilding the face of the country ... at a rather definite yearly rate."²⁴ Exactly how, he did not say.

Apparently, the President and Norris were thinking along the same lines, but the matter went no further than that. On 9 January 1934, Roosevelt asked Dill, Norris, and several other interested congressmen to discuss among themselves the river basin question, then come to the White House "and talk over the

possibility of one piece of legislation to cover the whole thing.”²⁵ The White House meeting was held on 31 January. There is no record of who actually attended, but, in addition to Norris, invitations went to Senators Hubert Stephens (D-Mississippi) and Alva Adams (D-Colorado) of the Senate Commerce Committee and to Senator Hiram Johnson (D-California). Congressmen included Riley Wilson, as chairman of the Flood Control Committee; Joseph J. Mansfield (D-Texas), chairman of the Rivers and Harbors Committee; William Driver (D-Arkansas); E.W. Marland (D-Oklahoma); Conrad Wallgren (D-Washington); Will Whittington (D-Mississippi); and several others -almost all from the South and West. The topic of the meeting was listed as “the discussion of flood control, irrigation, reclamation and waterways.”²⁶ Following this meeting, FDR told reporters that it was just a preliminary discussion of flood control and river basin development.

We talked about flood control from the point of view of national planning with the general thought that we would try to work out a national plan in the larger aspect that would list the various rivers and flood control projects in the order of their necessity; that is, on the order of damage done, human beings affected, property affected, et cetera. But that is as far as we got, discussing national planning for flood control and all the things that go with it, power, reclamation, submarginal lands and everything else.²⁷

Two days after this meeting, Senator Norris introduced a resolution before the Senate requesting the President to submit a report on “a comprehensive plan for the improvement and development of the rivers of the United States, with a view of giving the Congress information for the guidance of legislation which will provide for the maximum amount of flood control, navigation, irrigation, and development of hydroelectric power.” Congressman Riley Wilson introduced the same resolution in the House.²⁸

To draft this report, the President appointed a Committee on Water Flow composed of the Secretaries of Interior, War, Agriculture, and Labor. The actual study was done by six subcommittees, organized on a regional basis, with members from the Interior, Agriculture, and War Departments represented on each subcommittee. The War Department’s representatives were all Corps officers, who served as subcommittee chairmen. The subcommittees began work on 20 February and submitted their reports on 27 March. The Committee on Water Flow sent its

report to the President on 17 April, and FDR presented it to Congress on 4 June 1934. The President asked the committee to report in the manner directed by Congress but supplemented the resolution by asking that the committee include in its report recommendations for the development of ten specific river basins.²⁹

This report had five important aspects. First, the committee agreed that comprehensive, long-range basin planning had considerable advantages over less coordinated levels of effort. Second, information required for proper planning was still scattered and often inadequate. Third, any plan would require agreement on cost sharing between federal, state, and local governments. Fourth, agreement was needed on criteria for choosing and setting priorities for projects. Finally, there would have to be a rational division of responsibility among the federal agencies involved in river basin affairs.³⁰

The committee selected ten river basins for more detailed analysis. It did so, however, with major disclaimers regarding lack of information and the preliminary and tentative nature of the whole selection process.³¹ The first five basins were reasonable enough choices. They were the Tennessee, St. Lawrence-Great Lakes, main stem Mississippi, Missouri-Platte, and Sacramento-San Joaquin basins. The Delaware basin was the sixth choice, largely on the basis of projected use for water supply and power. It outranked both the Colorado and Columbia rivers. The Ohio Valley was ninth (just ahead of the Great Salt Lake basin), and the Susquehanna River basin failed to make it in at all. For those interested primarily in flood control, this was not an encouraging report.

The most significant item in the Water Flow Committee's report, however, was Secretary of War George H. Dern's supplementary letter, which took the entire report to task. First, he said that the attempt to select ten river basins for special study was premature and haphazard and would invite criticism that could be avoided with more study. It gave Congress no direction on how to implement a program and thus "might cause a reversion toward pork barrel and log rolling methods" of authorizing projects. Most important, it "ignores the fact that the data are available right now for the preparation of a comprehensive plan in full compliance with the request of Congress." He referred to the Corps' 308 reports, which had been in process for

the past seven years and which, at a cost of more than \$10 million, were now almost complete for every major river basin in the nation. He noted that the Norris-Wilson resolution "is substantially identical" to the 1927 congressional authorization for the 308 survey program. While the 308 reports were restricted to navigation, power, flood control, and irrigation, studies of "stream pollution, soil erosion, reforestation, recreation, and sociological plans .. can be superimposed upon the data already submitted without conflict." The implementation of programs in these areas, Dern maintained, could be done best by existing federal, state, or local agencies. He added that the overall planning had already been accomplished by the Corps of Engineers, which had "a familiarity with water-use problems that could not be acquired by any new group without years of intensive and continuous study."

Dern thought the existing 308 reports, collectively considered, were "sufficient in scope and form... as a comprehensive plan responsive to Senate Resolution 164 . " Congress could authorize these plans, designate an agency to determine construction priorities, and have them constructed by the Corps (except for irrigation projects, which would stay with the Department of the Interior). Funding for some local-federal cost-sharing plan similar to federally funded highways "would eliminate pork barrel legislation" and "keep river and harbor work out of politics." Placing all this in the War Department, he concluded, would "make it possible to work according to a carefully developed plan and would keep the work in the hands of a closely knit, efficient, and continuing agency of the government, namely the Corps of Engineers of the Army."³² Dern's view eventually carried the day in the Flood Control Act of 1936.³³ Ickes must have been upset with the Secretary of War, but there is no record of any official reply to Dern's challenge.

Insofar as the Ickes-Dern dispute was over jurisdiction as much as philosophy, it had its counterpart in the clash between the Rivers and Harbors and Flood Control Committees of the House of Representatives. Congressman Wilson appears to have ignited the clash with a major speech to the House on 13 April 1934 . He stated that the President's annual message in January, the Norris-Wilson resolutions, the work of the Committee on Water Flow and the Mississippi Valley Committee, and the numerous flood control bills pending before his Flood Control

Committee all clearly signaled “a Nation-wide call... for well planned and definite action for the protection of life and property and for the conservation and use of our natural resources.” Fortunately, he continued, the Corps of Engineers’ 308 surveys provided almost all the data needed to carry out a national program of flood control. The Corps could supply Congress with any additional information so that work could begin as soon as Congress gave its approval. He thought that the final selection of flood control projects should be left to the Committee on Flood Control just as navigation projects were left to the Rivers and Harbors Committee. This procedure was provided for in Section 3 of the Flood Control Act of 1917. He assured the House that there was “no conflict between the work of the Committee on Flood Control and the Rivers and Harbors Committee.”³⁴

Chairman Joseph Mansfield of the Rivers and Harbors Committee vigorously disagreed. He and others on his committee were already frustrated by the fact that there had been no rivers and harbors bill for the past four years. FDR, he said, was still opposed to any rivers and harbors legislation because of the cost and because the President also contemplated “a new program to be applied to inland waters.”³⁵ Equally aggravating was the expenditure of millions of dollars by the PWA without the approval of the Rivers and Harbors Committee, a situation characterized by Congressman James W. Mott (R-Oregon) as “a complete surrender ... [to] the discretionary jurisdiction of the Secretary of the Interior.”³⁶ Mansfield and several others criticized the Norris-Wilson resolution, claiming they had no knowledge of it before it was rushed through in February. It was, Mansfield said, a usurpation of power by the Flood Control Committee. When the Committee on Water Flow report comes in, he added, it should go to the Rivers and Harbors Committee rather than to the Flood Control Committee. Illinois Democratic Congressman Claude V. Parsons concluded that the entire report was redundant because the Corps’ 308 reports provided all the information needed for a comprehensive waterways program.³⁷

On 11 May, Mansfield rose again in the House to attack the Flood Control Committee. He reminded the House that, contrary to popular impressions, the Corps’ 308 reports, which were authorized under the Rivers and Harbors Act of 1927, came out of his committee, not the Flood Control Committee. It was the Corps and his committee that had, since the establishment of the

Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors in 1902, ended the pork barrel abuses of the previous century.³⁸ Mansfield, along with Congressman P. James Buchanan (D-Texas), anticipated that both the Rivers and Harbors Committee and the Corps' Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors were to be removed from most future river improvement work. This fear prompted a strong outpouring of support for both the committee and the Corps. Martin Dies, also a Texas Democrat, said that such an action was "inconceivable," and any attempt to relieve the Rivers and Harbors Committee of its jurisdiction was "going to prove unsuccessful." But he was reminded by Congressman Mott that under the current emergency relief and public works programs, extensive river improvement projects were being carried out by the PWA without the approval of either the Rivers and Harbors Committee or the Corps of Engineers.³⁹

Throughout the acrimonious debate in the House, President Roosevelt's statements on water resources development were mentioned only once, by Mansfield, but it seems certain that they caused much of the anxiety expressed by Mansfield and his allies. Probably most disturbing to them were the President's extended remarks to the press on 14 February 1934. When asked by reporters about the Committee on Water Flow, Roosevelt replied that year after year the rivers and harbors bills included projects funded for those congressmen "who could talk the loudest." He hoped to end this situation by issuing a report on waterways and drainage basins that would lead to the establishment of "a permanent planning commission," which would be "non-political, non-partisan" and could plan for 25 or 50 years into the future.⁴⁰ Each year, as the President envisioned it,

the National Government would plan to spend some more or less regular sum which, in a sense, would take the place of the public works money and would be used primarily to relieve unemployment which we will always have with us in one form or another... Of course it would include a great many factors. It would include flood-control, soil erosion, the question of sub-marginal land, reforestation, agriculture and the use of crops, decentralization of industry and, finally, transportation... and water power.⁴¹

When asked where this plan would leave the Board of Engineers for Rivers and Harbors and the House Committee on Rivers and Harbors, the President replied, "Now you are talking about mechanics. I don't know how it would work out. Essentially the Committee is getting all the information from the Board of

Engineers of the Army.” Dismissing further questions on specifics, Roosevelt said his plan would convert waterways expenditures into “an orderly process” resulting in “the elimination of the old methods of the rivers and harbors bills.”⁴² He thought some different arrangement, centered in the Public Works Administration of the Department of the Interior, would do a superior job.⁴³ Clearly Roosevelt was talking about the establishment of what became, in June 1934, the National Resources Committee. In this amorphous stage, however, the idea must have seemed much more of a threat to established congressional interests than an opportunity from which those interested in waterways improvements could benefit.

The entire squabble between the Rivers and Harbors and Flood Control Committees focused on which congressional committee should oversee the development of the nation’s water resources. In this context, the sharp reaction of Mansfield and his supporters becomes understandable. Under the emergency relief program of 1933, rivers and harbors projects were being carried out by the executive branch without the approval of the Rivers and Harbors Committee. Now the Flood Control Committee was seeking a larger role, and the President seemed clearly to be contemplating removal of all river basin development planning to an executive agency or commission. It is possible that Mansfield thought Wilson and his Flood Control Committee were making a veiled bid to become the major multipurpose river development committee – possibly having come to an understanding with the President on this issue. While an interesting speculation, it seems quite unlikely. There is no evidence of any agreement or even much communication between Roosevelt and Wilson at this time or at any time prior to the passage of the Flood Control Act of 1936. One memorandum in the White House flood control files dated 16 February 1934 states that Speaker of the House Henry Rainey informed FDR about the committee rivalry and suggested that the President ask that a new special committee on rivers be created. Roosevelt replied that he was reluctant to get involved in the controversy, but might suggest such a committee when he finally was prepared to give Congress a special message on flood control.⁴⁴

Indeed, Roosevelt did not appear to be very concerned about the whole issue. There were far more important and pressing issues facing the administration at this time. For unknown reasons, he did hold onto the Committee on Water Flow report

for almost seven weeks after receiving it. The "Rainey Memo" of 16 February 1934 indicates that Roosevelt expected to be able to go to Congress with the committee report and to recommend a flood control or multipurpose river program, but this did not happen. When he finally did send the report to Congress on 4 June, his letter of transmittal said nothing about creating a special committee such as Speaker Rainey had suggested. Instead, it stressed the preliminary nature of the findings and asked that the study be developed further so that he could outline a comprehensive plan to the next Congress.⁴⁵ Roosevelt reiterated his strategy in a more general address to the Congress on 8 June 1934, in which he stated that he hoped to have ready for the next Congress "a carefully considered national plan, covering the development and human use of our natural resources of land and water over a long period of years."⁴⁶ The Water Flow Committee report solved nothing, but it did reveal the deep divisions between the Departments of War and Interior and the parallel cleavage between the Rivers and Harbors and Flood Control Committees. In the Senate, the report went to the Committee on Commerce, but the House dispute prevented the report from being assigned to any committee.⁴⁷ It was not a good beginning for the President's water resources development program.

For Riley Wilson and other congressmen from districts where flood control was a major issue, the delay in the administration's flood control program was disappointing—especially in view of the fact that the congressional elections of 1934 were looming ahead. A few days after the President had sent his land and water resources message to Congress, Wilson went to the White House to see if Roosevelt had a more concrete plan for flood control. Apparently, he spoke with one of Roosevelt's aides and was told that there was a program developing similar to that suggested by the Water Flow Committee report (or possibly by the Mississippi Valley Committee). While there would be nothing ready for congressional action for this session, congressmen "will be in a position, particularly those who need it, to go before the people and say 'Here is what we propose to do.'"⁴⁸